

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom today released the text of a letter sent to President Bush May 3 asking him to raise religious-freedom issues with Nigerian President Olusegun Obasanjo during the latter's visit to the United States. The text of the letter follows:

May 3, 2001

Dear Mr. President:

On behalf of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, I urge you to raise in your upcoming meeting with President Olusegun Obasanjo the need to promote and protect religious freedom in Nigeria.

Over the last year, the Commission has looked closely at the conditions of religious freedom in Nigeria. In September 2000, Commission staff traveled to Nigeria and met with officials and

religious leaders in northern Nigeria and Abuja to assess the religious freedom situation in the aftermath of serious violence between Muslims and Christians sparked by the movement in several northern states to expand the legal application of Islamic law (Shariah). The Commission's annual report of May 1, 2001 contains a , [including specific recommendations regarding how U.S. policy can promote religious freedom in Nigeria. A copy of the Commission's report and recommendations](#) is attached.

Religious life in Nigeria is public, vigorous, and diverse. Nevertheless, Nigeria continues to suffer from outbursts of violent communal conflict along religious and ethnic lines, pervasive mistrust among religious and ethnic communities, and reportedly serious lapses in the protection of human rights generally. The threats to religious freedom, including reports of religious discrimination, are serious and ongoing. Moreover, recent events portend a possible deterioration in the conditions of religious freedom. Serious outbreaks of Muslim-Christian violence - exacerbated by social, economic, and political conditions that foster religious and ethnic tensions - threaten to divide further the populace along religious lines and undermine the foundations of religious freedom in Nigeria.

While laws based on Shariah are not new in northern Nigeria, the current move to expand Shariah in the criminal area has become a contentious and volatile issue throughout Nigeria, and a source of tension, division, and violence between Muslims and Christians. The states that have implemented, or plan to implement, Shariah-based criminal law assert that the laws apply only to Muslims. Nevertheless, there is growing concern, inside and outside Nigeria, over how the expansion of Shariah will affect the rights of individual Muslims and non-Muslims and relations between the religious communities. In January 2001, a quasi-official corps of volunteer Shariah enforcers in Zamfara state was reportedly given full powers of arrest and prosecution by Governor Ahmed Sani, because local police had failed to enforce Shariah laws. This raises the possibility that Shariah provisions may be enforced against some Nigerians to whom they should not apply. In Kano state, official Shariah enforcers (known as the Hizbah) are acting as a kind of "shadow" police force, and there are several reports of criminal elements masquerading as Shariah enforcers in order to perpetrate assaults and other crimes, further threatening the rule of law.

The Nigerian federal government has taken some steps to address the problems associated with the expansion of Shariah in northern states, and has acted to ease communal tensions and quell violence.

In light of the circumstances in Nigeria, the Commission recommends that you urge President

Obasanjo to continue his efforts to promote and protect the religious freedom of all Nigerians and to take further steps to do so, including

- to condemn - publicly, forcefully, and consistently - religious intolerance and discrimination, and to promote religious freedom and mutual understanding between Muslims and Christians;

- to counter religiously-based discrimination by (1) investigating alleged discriminatory obstacles to establishing and repairing places of worship and work with state and local governments in order to remove such obstacles where they exist; (2) providing religious instruction (where offered in public schools) on a non-discriminatory basis and without compelling any student with a religious objection to attend; and (3) ensuring equal access to state-run radio and other government media resources to all religious groups without discrimination;

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- to monitor closely the implementation of Shariah-based criminal law in northern states: (1) to ensure that it does not apply to non-Muslims and respects the religious-freedom rights of all citizens, and (2) to prevent law enforcement activities in northern states by any quasi-official or private corps of Shariah enforcers; and

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- to take effective steps to prevent and contain acts of communal violence, prevent reprisal attacks, and bring those responsible for such violence to justice.

We hope that President Obasanjo's visit to Washington provides an occasion for a serious discussion of religious freedom and communal violence in Nigeria.

Respectfully,
Elliott Abrams
Chairman

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom was created by the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 to monitor the status of freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief abroad, as defined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and related international instruments, and to give independent policy recommendations to the President, the Secretary of State and the Congress.

Hon. Elliott Abrams ,
- Dr. Firuz Kazemzadeh ,